Herpes Infection

What is Herpes?
Herpes is a family name for some 50 related viruses. In addition to herpes simplex, the family also contains the viruses responsible for infectious mononucleosis (Epstein-Barr Virus), chicken pox (varicella), and shingles (herpes zoster). Patients sometimes confuse herpes simplex and herpes zoster because of the similarity in names.

Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV)
HSV may cause blister-like sores almost anywhere on a person’s skin, though it usually occurs around the mouth and nose or the buttocks and genitals. HSV infections can become a real nuisance because they tend to reappear. The sores may be painful and embarrassing, often interfering with work and personal lives. For some chronically ill people and newborn babies, these viral infections can be quite serious. There are two types of HSV – Type 1 and Type 2.

Herpes Simplex Virus-Type 1
HSV-Type 1 usually affects the lips, mouth, nose, chin, or cheeks. Most people acquire it during infancy or childhood from close contact with family members or friends who carry the virus. It is transmitted by touching or kissing, and by the use of common eating utensils and towels. A rash or cold sores ("fever blisters") involving the mouth and gums appear shortly after exposure. Type 1 infections may also occur in the genital area after oral sexual exposure with an individual who has a herpes infection on the face.

Herpes Simplex Virus-Type 2
HSV-Type 2 usually occurs in the genital area (penis, vagina, or cervix), or on the buttocks or anal skin 2 to 20 days following sexual contact with an infected person. This infection has reached epidemic numbers, affecting between 5 and 20 million persons in the United States, or up to 20% of all sexually active adults. While sexual intercourse is the most common means of transmission, infection may occur without sexual contact.

Symptoms
Symptoms of both primary and repeat attacks may include a minor rash or itching, painful skin ulcers, fever, sore muscles, and a burning sensation during urination. Sites and frequency of return bouts are variable. The initial episode may be so mild that a person does not realize that he or she has a herpetic infection. Years later when there is a recurrence of HSV it may be mistaken as an initial attack and lead to accusations of infidelity by a partner.

Primary & Recurrent Infections
There are two kinds of infections - primary and recurrent. The primary infection lasts from seven to ten days. First, small, fluid-filled blisters appear which vary in number from one to a whole cluster. Before the blisters erupt, the skin may itch or become very sensitive. The blisters break spontaneously or with minor trauma allowing the fluid contents to ooze out. This fluid is filled with virus and is very contagious. The lesions then look like small erosions or ulcers and they may join to form larger ulcers. Eventually, scabs form and fall off, leaving slightly red skin. Although the primary infection heals completely and rarely
causes a scar, the virus that caused it remains in the body, living in nerve cells in a dormant phase. Many people will not experience a recurrence. Others may have many, either in the same location as the first infection or nearby. Recurrent infections, which tend to be milder than primary ones, may be triggered by a variety of stresses including fever, exposure to the sun and menstruation. However, for many individuals, the recurrences are unpredictable and have no recognizable cause.

Both primary and recurrent infections may be preceded by pain or tenderness in the thigh, buttock, or genital area between 1 to 3 days before sores develop. This is called a *prodrome*.

**Treatment**

Between 200,000 and 500,000 persons from all socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups “catch” genital herpes (Type 2) each year. Since there is no “cure” for herpes infections, the best way to control it is by prevention.

- Most acute episodes of active disease are self-limited and will resolve with time and local care. Care of the infected area includes careful cleaning with soap and water, drying and covering with a dry dressing.
- Several anti-viral medications are now available including Acyclovir, valacyclovir and Famciclovir. None will cure the infection but they can reduce the extent of the outbreak and speed the time to healing. Acyclovir (brand-name, Zovirax) is the most commonly used medication. This medication is taken by mouth 2-5 times a day. Valtrex is a longer-acting medication which only has to be taken twice a day. In certain cases of frequently recurrent attacks, long term treatment may increase the period between bouts. An anti-viral cream or ointment to the affected area after cleansing may also be helpful.
- Avoid all sexual and direct contact of the infected area with others as long as there are visible or symptomatic lesions or if tingling, burning, itching, or tenderness - signs of a recurrence - are present in an area of the body where you have had a herpes infection before.
- Towels and clothing should be separated and washed in hot water with detergent and no underclothing or swimsuits should be exchanged.
- Hands should be carefully washed with soap and water before and after cleaning and dressing infected sites.